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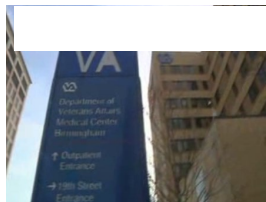
## Initiative taken to help veterans with mental health issues in Alabama

Posted: Apr 04, 2014 6:34 AM CDT

Updated: Apr 04, 2014 6:34 AM CDT

By John Huddleston - [email](#)

BIRMINGHAM, AL (WBRC) - Three people were killed and 16 others were wounded in the recent attack at Fort Hood, Texas before Specialist Ivan Lopez, shot and killed himself. Officials say the underlying cause of the attack appears to be Lopez's unstable mental condition. Although Lopez, an Iraq vet, did not see combat, the mental health of military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan has become more of a concern in recent years.



Source: WBRC video

The mental health staff at the Birmingham VA Medical Center has increased significantly over the past ten years. They have grown from just under 30 workers to over 200. It is part of a larger nationwide initiative to get vets the treatment they need.

"The brain is an organ, like any other organ in the body, and sometimes it gets sick. And fortunately today we have treatments that are very effective," said Dr. Daniel Dahl, V.A. supervising psychiatrist.

It is unclear what caused army specialist Ivan Lopez to allegedly open fire Wednesday at Fort Hood, but his mental state is believed to have played a significant role.

"We have very strong evidence that he had a medical history that indicates unstable psychiatric or physiological condition," said Lt. General Mark Milley. "We believe that to be the fundamental underlying cause."

According to the American Psychiatric Association, mental illness is the leading cause of hospitalization among active duty troops. Among veterans, one in five returning from Iraq or Afghanistan are diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder.

Dahl says there is no shame in asking for help.

"There still is a stigma against mental health, but it's an illness," he said. "We want to take good care of our veterans. They served us and we want to serve and appreciate the opportunity to serve them."

The VA has nine of those community outpatient clinics

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